

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## A Discursive Investigation of Leading in Organisational Conversations

### Thesis

#### How to cite:

Hollis, David (2015). A Discursive Investigation of Leading in Organisational Conversations. MRes thesis The Open University.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2014 The Author



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0000efc1>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

David Hollis (BSc (Hons), MSc)

**A Discursive Investigation of Leading in Organisational  
Conversations**

Master of Research (MRes)

The Open University

Management and Business

September 11<sup>th</sup> 2014

Date of Submission: 30 September 2014

Date of Award: 2 March 2015

ProQuest Number: 13834835

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 13834835

Published by ProQuest LLC (2019). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

### **Abstract**

This paper considers “leadership as a process of social construction” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p.254). Using Wood’s (2005) process ontology this paper differs from the majority of other studies within relational perspectives of leadership (which demarcate who leaders ‘are’ before process is studied; Ramsey, 2013). This paper uses Wood’s perspective to explore how social constructions of leadership and of leaders are continually (re)produced in-process. Using Gergen’s (1994) ‘act + supplement’ theory to explore the performative effect (Searle, 1969; Austin, 1975) of conversations, this paper draws on the studies of Packendorff, Crevani, and Lindgren (2014), Crevani (2011) and Crevani, Lindgren, and Packdendorff (2010) by exploring the (re)production of direction in conversations as micro-processes of leadership. This paper also builds on Crevani and colleagues’ studies by focusing on the role of linguistic devices in the (re)production of leadership and leader constructions. In doing so this paper offers an alternative to studies that have explored the effect of leaders uni-directional use of linguistic devices on their followers (e.g. Eisenberg, 1984; Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Watson, 2004). Participant observation of a sales and marketing meeting and unstructured interviews with some of the attendees was carried out. Within conversations, talk about events, problems and opportunities were constructed into issues. These issues (re)produced direction (as a micro-process of leadership) by focusing actors’ attention and widening out or narrowing down social realities. The findings also highlight the subtlety through which leadership positions emerge. This was done through an extension and concertina of hierarchy which appeared within conversations, with some actor’s talk positioning both themselves and others as being responsible for contributing to social realities.

## Table of Contents

1. Aims and Objectives .....	4
2. Introduction .....	7
2.1. <i>Language and leadership</i> .....	7
2.2. <i>Defining and operationalising a relational view of leadership</i> .....	9
2.3. <i>Positioning</i> .....	10
3. Methods .....	11
3.1. <i>Methodology</i> .....	11
3.2. <i>Methods</i> .....	12
3.3. <i>Sampling</i> .....	14
3.4. <i>Recording</i> .....	15
3.5. <i>Coding and Analysis</i> .....	16
3.6. <i>Interpretation</i> .....	18
4. Findings .....	18
5. Discussion.....	35
5.1. <i>Widening out and narrowing down social realities</i> .....	35
5.2. <i>Positioning and hierarchy</i> .....	36
5.3. <i>Linguistic devices, producing direction, and positioning</i> .....	37
5.4. <i>Little 'd'iscourse and big 'D'iscourse</i> .....	38
5.5. <i>Limitations/Future Directions</i> .....	39
5.6. <i>Reflexivity</i> .....	41
5.7. <i>Conclusion</i> .....	44
6. Ethics .....	45
References .....	47
Appendices .....	51

## 1. Aims and Objectives

This paper adopts a processual ontology whereby social realities of leadership and of leaders are viewed as ongoing interdependent constructions which exist and are known only in relations (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Within relational processes communication assumes the primacy of relations (Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006) with talk claimed to be a key medium, maybe *the* key medium, through which leadership and leaders are (re)constructed as social realities (Hosking, 2007). Relational perspectives of leadership assert, therefore, that neither people nor organisations are the makers “of” processes; rather they are made “in” processes (Hosking, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006). However, despite some leadership studies claiming to follow a relational perspective, Ramsey (2013) found all but one of these studies have begun with an a priori view of leaders as stable entities.

Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) note “any problematization necessarily takes its point of departure within a specific metatheoretical position (i.e., epistemological and ontological stance)” (p.252). This paper draws on Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) and Sandberg and Alvesson’s (2011) view of problematization by questioning the ontological assumptions underlying studies carried out within relational views’ of leadership. This problematization shows how the majority of these studies follow a process ontology that is closer to a view of process described by Rescher (2000). Rescher describes a view of process whereby social actors (such as leaders) are stable entities who enter, and are reconstituted, in-processes. Both Ramsey (2013) and the current paper therefore question the extent to which researchers’ preordained labelling of leaders and managers may influence an empirical exploration of how relational leadership and leader performances are (re)produced in- process.

This paper views Wood’s (2005) process ontology as facilitating an empirical exploration of Hosking (2000) and Uhl-Bien’s (2006) view of relational leadership. Wood notes “The ‘essence’ of leadership is not the individual social actor but a relation of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, having neither beginning nor end” (p. 1115). Through this ontological lens Wood views leadership as “movement, open and dynamic process... [that] at best appears only in the most fleeting moments” (pg. 1118). In Wood’s view therefore leaders (and other social actors) are conceptualised as “temporary stabilizations drawn from an internal movement of difference” (p. 1116) rather than as entities who enter processes. By adopting Wood’s ontology, this paper therefore departs from the majority of studies carried out from within a relational perspective by viewing leadership as being completely emergent in process.

In addition to the ontological problematization described above, this paper also aims to further relational understandings of leadership by exploring *how* relational talk (re)produces leader and leadership performances. More specifically it aims to explore how linguistic devices and jargon are relationally used to (re)produce these realities. The use of devices and jargon in producing social realities of leadership has previously been explored (e.g. Eisenberg, 1984; Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Watson, 2004). However, scrutiny of the philosophical assumptions underlying this research shows that whilst these studies adopt a social constructionist epistemology by exploring how leadership is discursively constructed, these scholars adopt an entitative ontology. To explain, Eisenberg (1984), Astley and Zammuto (1992), Watson (2004) seemingly adopt an ontology whereby leaders and/or managers are seen as stable entities who, through their use of talk, create leadership moments for their followers (who in turn are also conceptualised as stable entities). Studies such as these have explored how leaders' unidirectional use of jargon produces social realities for their 'followers'. However, the omnidirectional producing of linguistic devices and jargon, and the role of devices and jargon in the (re)production of constructions of leadership and of being a leader, has received scant scholarly attention.

This paper looks to Gergen's (1994) 'act+ supplement' theory as a framework through which to explore the perlocutionary force of talk within conversations (i.e. their performative effect on real time relations and actions whereby actors produce a social, improvised performance of a performed reality; Searle, 1969; Austin, 1975). By doing so, this paper builds on the work of Ramsey (1998; 2013) who used act+ supplement theory to explore how leadership moments emerged through the processes of conversational travel. This paper seeks to build on this work by exploring *how* linguistic devices and jargon within actors' conversations relationally facilitate the (re)producing of leader and leadership performances.

This framework also enables an exploration of whether 'language games' (Pondy, 1978; Kelly, 2008) are apparent in the production of realities. Act + supplement theory facilitates the exploration of how relational talk constructs space for meaning to exist and how, via the construction of this space, the conversation leverages some actors as above others within conversations. Adopting Gergen's (1994) framework also allows for an exploration of how linguistic devices and jargon within conversation constitutes speakers and hearers in certain ways. Act + supplement theory also facilitates an exploration of whether devices and jargons can be resources through which speakers and hearers negotiate new subject positions, of, for example, leaders and followers (Davies and Harré, 1990).

An operational and definitional challenge of using a processual ontology is how leadership can be differentiated from other organising processes in the workplace (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012; Alvesson

and Spicer, 2012; Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff, 2010). Since a rejuvenation of the interest in relational views' of leadership in the mid-2000s (Denis et al., 2012), there has been a growing interest among some scholars who are interested in the micro-processes involved in (re)constituting leadership. The relational (re)production of direction within conversations as a micro-process of leadership has garnered particular attention. For example, in their proposal for a new integrative ontology of leadership to replace a tripod ontology of leadership of leaders, followers, and their shared goals, Drath, et al's (2008) review of the leadership literature found the producing of direction to be one of three key outcomes. Similarly, Crevani and colleagues (i.e. Packendorff, Crevani, and Lindgren, 2014; Crevani, 2011; Crevani et al., 2010) found the producing of direction to be inherent within most definitions of leadership. As such, this cohort of researchers proposed, and empirically interpreted, the (re)production of direction in conversations to be a key element of leadership.

As noted above, similar to the majority of studies conducted from within relational views' of leadership, Crevani and colleague's work has proceeded with a process ontology. This is closer to the one described by Rescher (2000) (i.e. where actors are reconstituted in processes) than to Wood's (2005) view of process where leadership and leaders are conceptualised as being (re)constructed within a process of becoming. By utilising Gergen's (1994) act+ supplement framework and exploring how subject positions are constructed and revealed in relational talk, this paper seeks to make a contribution to extant studies within relational perspectives' of leadership. This is by furthering the understanding of how leadership and leaders are being continually discursively (re)constructed in actors' relational talk.

Like Crevani and colleagues, this paper is primarily focused on actors' talk within (and about) meetings, which Boden (1994) notes are "where organisations come together" (p.81). It seeks to explore the following questions:

- \* How are moments of direction constructed in the spaces in between actors' relational talk in team meetings?
  
- \* How are leader positionings opened up or narrowed down in the spaces in between actors' relational talk in team meetings?



## 2. Introduction

Studies of leadership can be characterised as shifting from entitative perspectives of leadership to more recent relational understandings (Hosking and Morley, 1991; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Entitative perspectives consider leadership to be in the traits, attributes and styles of a few privileged individuals (cf. Northouse, 2010; Yukl, 2010). Relational understandings, in contrast, consider that leadership may be discerned in the collective interactions between people (Denis et al., 2012).

Relational views of leadership start with process ontologies and view persons, leadership and other relational realities as made in processes (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p.655). From these views neither people nor organisations are the makers *of* processes; rather they are constructed through ongoing and multiple constructions *within* processes (Hosking, 2000). For Wood (2005), rather than being an attribute of actor 'A' or 'B', or as an action of a leader within a relationship ( $A \rightarrow B$ ), leadership is continually (re)emerging in the midst of conversations in the space in-between actor A and B ( $A \leftrightarrow B$ ).

Within relational views, the primacy of relations between actors becomes a key focus (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Communication (e.g., conversation, narrating, dialoguing, and multiloguing; Dachler and Hosking, 1995) is considered key to these relations and as being "fundamentally implicated *in* the production of social reality" as opposed to being a mirror of reality or as a conduit for communicating information (Phillips and Oswick, 2012, p. 439). The role of language in constructing social realities from both entitative and process ontologies is turned to in greater depth below.

### 2.1. *Language and leadership*

Exploring how leadership is discursively constructed and created in process has been a long-standing interest for scholars. Wittgenstein's (1953) 'forms of life' and Pondy's (1978) 'language games' are two notable scholarly efforts which explore how words derive their meaning from the historical context of discourse, or the 'language game' in which they are used. Each 'game' is viewed as having its own rules of grammar and a potentially infinite number of applications that open up space for language and meaning to exist (Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Kelly, 2008). For Kelly, "the question that remains... is not whether leadership is a language-game... but how these games take shape, how they are played, what forms of life they produce, and in turn are produced and sustained through activity." (2008, p. 769).

Several studies have explored leaders/senior manager's use of language as a game, rather than language games in the plural sense. For example, Eisenberg (1984) and Astley and Zammuto (1992) discuss how managers' strategic use of ambiguous talk constructs a semblance of order and direction for followers who are faced with inconsistent demands. Turning to an empirical study of managers' use of language as a game, Watson's (2004) series of ethnographic studies claimed senior managers' use of managerial-pseudojargon constructed a social reality for followers by concretising the abstract phenomenon that is the 'organisation'. By focusing on leaders' and managers' use of language, these researchers are seemingly adopting an entitative ontological stance; i.e. they view leaders and managers as being independent stable structures (Thompson, 2011) with this stance precluding an exploration of how leadership and leaders are (re)shaped in process. This focus on leaders/managers' talk also impedes an exploration of *how* talk (for example, pseudojargon) *relationally* constructs leadership and leaders in conversations. An alternative perspective to the stance taken by these authors is offered by Ramsey (1998) who, drawing on the work of Gergen (1994), views language as equivocal with its meaning becoming narrowed down or opened up when supplemented by another person in conversation.

From Gergen's perspective, supplements create and constrain an utterance's meaning (i.e. an utterance means 'this' and not 'that') thereby creating momentary direction and (temporarily) narrowing down the possibilities of the utterer's identity and agency. However, although the actor supplementing can (in principle) supplement the utterance in any way they choose, the roughly ordered state of ordinary cultural life make only certain supplements sensible or meaningful. In addition, the supplement is a candidate for further supplementation. The supplement now stands in the same position as the initial action or utterance and is "open to further specification, clarification, or obliteration through subsequent actions of the initial actor (or others)" (1994, p.266). And, because the supplement occurs within the context of the initial action, and has been created and constrained by that action, it is the relationship between act and supplement that becomes subject to future revision and clarification. The net effect of the act-supplement and the act-supplement-supplement relationships mean that meaning is a temporary achievement that is subject to continuous alteration, with Gergen (1994) noting "All that is fixed and settled in one instance may be cast into ambiguity or undone in the next" (p.267).

Act+ supplement theory may therefore be a useful framework through which to explore the perlocutionary force of actors' talk (Searle, 1969; Austin, 1975). More specifically it may help to explore how performances of leadership and of being a leader are relationally constructed, and whether linguistic devices and phrases facilitate these constructions.

## *2.2. Defining and operationalising a relational view of leadership*

Alvesson (1996) called for scholars to be more open to the ambiguity of practices which may be interpreted as “leadership”. Within this call, Alvesson advocated a shift in emphasis away from developing a grand theory of leadership which focuses on the exploration of stable behaviour patterns, attitudes or traits. A move towards an exploration of how leadership practices and processes emerge within everyday workplace situations (e.g. meetings, job interviews, spontaneous encounters) was instead encouraged.

Pointing to the work of Hosking (1988), Crevani (2011) notes how a situational study of processes and practices is not a new trend within leadership research. However, it has not been until the mid-2000s that interest in leadership from a relational perspective has peaked (Denis et al., 2012). Within several of these more contemporary studies, the (re)production of direction in processes of relating has been proposed as being present within leadership definitions (Crevani, 2011; Drath et al., 2008) and has been studied as a micro-process of leadership (Packendorff et al., 2014; Crevani, 2011; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2011; Lindgren, Packendorff and Tham, 2011; Crevani et al., 2010). For example, building on Drath et al.’s proposal for an integrative ontology of leadership, Crevani et al. (2010) went further by claiming “Direction is to us what is basically produced in leadership interactions” (p.81).

Although the (re)production of direction has been proposed to be a key micro-process of leadership, there are differing views with regards to what constitutes this process. Drath et al. (2008) see it occurring when there is “widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims, and mission” (p.636). For Crevani and colleagues (i.e. Packendorff et al., 2014; Crevani, 2011; Crevani et al., 2010) the (re)production of direction doesn’t need to be one-directional (i.e. to be produced by, and for, a collective). Rather, Crevani and colleagues see a possibility for the (re)production of direction within processes of relating when there are divergent arguments, interpretations and decisions within collectives. Within this group of scholars’ studies, the (re)production of direction occurs when events, problems and opportunities present within actors’ conversations become constructed into issues, with these issues focusing actors’ attention towards a specific aspect of social reality and away from others (Crevani, 2011).

As noted above, the (re)production of direction as a micro-process of leadership is gaining the interest of Drath et al. (2008) and Crevani and colleagues. Scholars interested in the perlocutionary force of talk may, however, find Drath et al.’s (2008) conceptualisation of interactions having intentionality behind them as a prerequisite for (re)producing direction problematic. For example, rather than focus on the performative effect of actors’ conversations, researchers may instead be drawn towards the meaning behind each actor’s

actions and words. Researchers interested in the effect of talk may find act + supplement theory to be a useful framework to build on Crevani and colleague's studies. Act + supplement may explore not only whether the relational construction of issues and positions are facilitating the (re)production of direction, but also whether linguistic devices facilitate this (re)production.

### **2.3. Positioning**

The processual ontological assumptions underlying relational views' of leadership have been criticised for not acknowledging that actors enter interactions on an unequal organisational footing. Denis et al. (2012), for example, note actors' history, background and power relations can potentially influence what is, and what can be constructed, in interactions.

However, in his call for more situational studies of leadership, Alvesson (1996) notes "taking the interpretive nature of research seriously means that one avoids prematurely applying totalizing concepts such as leader and leadership" (p.468). Alvesson called for scholars to explore leadership as a situated phenomenon with the foci of study being that which goes on in the work context and the relations being (re)formed in processes of sense-making, attribution and negotiation.

Despite Alvesson's (1996) suggestion and Denis et al's (2012) criticism, Ramsey (2013) notes the majority of research conducted from within relational views of leadership tend to delineate who leaders 'are' before they enter interactions. One exception to this trend is Carroll and Simpson's (2012) study of online forum conversations within a leadership development programme (Ramsey, 2013). Carroll and Simpson's (2012) study is interesting as it explores the processual and relational emergence of leadership development within and between conversation frames as emergent and dynamic sociality movements. Despite the authors' hope that their "inquiry offers the confidence that such practices and activities can be co-constructed in an online environment in ways that parallel and embed the leadership conversations, relationships and work undertaken offline" (p.1306) there is little 'offline' research from within relational views of leadership that doesn't identify who leaders 'are' in advance of studying processes of relating. The extent to which this identification may play on scholars' implicit or explicit views concerning how leadership is produced *in process* is unclear. However, Alvesson's suggestion and Ramsey's observation are worth considering when looking at scholarly analysis of how leadership and leaders are constructed in process.

Cooren et al. (2011) offer an alternative conceptualisation to Denis et al's (2012) view. They note "issues of power, authority or precedence should not force us to look outside communication but, on the contrary, invite

analysts to identify all the figures participating in the co-construction and co-constitution of an (organisational) situation, whether we speak, for instance, in terms of statuses, identities, expertise, rights, responsibilities, or money” (p.9). Of these two views, Cooren et al’s appears more in keeping with Uhl-Bien’s (2006) relational view of leadership; that people are made *in process* rather than makers *of process*.

Subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990) may facilitate exploration of how people are made *in process*. Through subject positions, actors are conceptualised as continually positioning self and others through their talk and they are continually being positioned by other people’s talk. A multitude of positions are thus constituted and reconstituted through talk. In Crevani and colleague’s studies, for example, actors were continually positioning and being positioned in relation to the organisation, working groups, and to other actors based on how an actor should be or what they should do. These positions were found to contribute to the structuring of relations and tasks and, ultimately, to the (re)production of direction. Crevani and colleagues explored actors’ construction of positions and how these constructions contributed to the (re)production of direction. However, these authors appear to differentiate between their samples according to role (e.g. manager/formal leader and employees) before they interpret their observations. As Davies and Harré (1990) note, having a preconceived idea of role may affect scholars’ interpretations of actors’ positioning of self and of others within conversations. Similarly, when considering the construction of empirical material in interviews, Alvesson (1996) notes how the interviewer’s explicit or implicit interpellation of the participant as, for example, a manager, an employee, a woman etc., can colour the accounts that are produced. Subject positions may therefore be a useful concept for researchers who take a relational view of leadership and who wish to explore how leader and follower positions are always shifting in actors’ talk.

### **3. Methods**

#### ***3.1. Methodology***

Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1983) understanding of ethnography as a methodology (rather than a way of writing about or analyzing social life; cf. Watson, 2011) was used in this paper. This involves the overt or covert participation of a researcher in people’s daily lives for an extended period; watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues to which they are concerned. More commonly today, some ethnographers are using ethnography as a methodology to further scholarly understanding about “how people ongoingly and discursively construct the

social phenomena which characterise the society to which they belong” (Hammersley, 2005, p.5). Employing ethnography as a methodology in this more contemporary sense was therefore consistent with the ontological stance previously outlined in this paper; that reality is created and made in process and, epistemologically, that constructions of phenomena are created discursively.

More specifically, a pilot focused ethnography study approach was used to explore the research aims (Knoblauch, 2005). Focused ethnography (FE) shares several of ethnography’s characteristics with the researcher being present, either overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives and watching, listening, questioning and collecting data on the issues to which they are concerned (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). However the distinguishing features of FE are, as Knoblauch (2005) notes, “Whereas classical ethnography turned towards social groups, social institutions and social events, focused ethnographies are more concerned with actions, interactions and social situations” (p.132). For example, rather than trying to study the management of a company, a researcher instead specifies management meetings as their focus of study. FE is therefore characterised by relatively short term field visits, with the relative brevity of researchers’ visits compensated for by the generation and analysis of rich audio and/or video data.

Sociological ethnographies, such as studying meetings, are typified more so by conditions of alterity (i.e. situations where ethnographers attempt to study differences, e.g. of scenes, settings and fields against a backdrop of common, shared knowledge) than by conditions of anthropological ‘strangeness’ (a situation of unfamiliarity not only with specific situations but also with the general culture) which requires researchers to immerse themselves over an extended period in the field (Knoblauch, 2005). Considering the ubiquity of team meetings within organisations (e.g. Lehmann-Willenbrock, Allen and Kauffeld, 2013; Rogelberg et al., 2010; Tracey, 2007) this genre was considered to be characterised more so by alterity than by strangeness and thus an FE approach was seen to be warranted.

### **3.2. *Methods***

Ethnographic methods are commonly characterised in organisational settings by the field ‘tools’ of observing (with whatever degree of participation), conversing (including interviewing) and the close reading of documentary sources (Ybema et al., 2009, p.6). Within this range of ‘tools,’ participation observation (PO) and/or in-depth relatively unstructured interviews have come to be the main methods researchers typically use (Hammersley, 2005; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In line with the aims of this research; to explore

how leadership and leaders are discursively re(constructed) in relational processes (i.e. conversations), both PO and unstructured interviews were felt to be fitting methods of choice.

As Gans (1999) notes, a merit of participant observation (PO) (understood as “an umbrella word covering several combinations of participation and observation” p.540) is that it allows researchers to observe what people do in “real life” contexts; not what they say they do. Also, non-participative observation should not interfere in the usual activities of the people being studied (Adler and Adler, 1994). Thus, PO was felt to be strongly suited to the study of actors’ naturalistic conversations within meetings.

An ‘observer-as-participant’ role, whereby the researcher enters the study community for the explicit purpose of conducting research and is known by the study community for doing so (Gold, 1958), was adopted in this paper. The rationale for employing this role was to be able to witness “naturally occurring talk” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995, p.140). However, as Merriam (1997) notes, adopting a relatively overt stance like this may mean participants were more conscious of the researcher’s presence and they might control their contribution to the meeting more tightly. To ameliorate this issue, so far as possible, participants were informed in the information sheet administered before the meeting (see Appendix 1) and in the introduction to the research by the researcher that this study was not looking for a ‘right or wrong’ kind of communication. In addition participants were informed in writing and orally that all contributions to the research were entirely voluntary, and would remain anonymous and confidential throughout the research (see chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of ethical issues).

Data were constructed through the ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation of field notes and audio recordings of meetings and interviews. Field notes included personal reflections on attendees’ body language; such as smiles and frowns which, as Hosking (2004) notes, can be read for meaning, along with the layout of the room (e.g. where participants were seated, and the use of brand signage and advertisements in the room). Audio recordings were used to allow for the collection and later transcription of participants’ talk in the meetings and interviews. The use of video recording was explored, but this was not possible due to a failure to gain consent for this from all participants.

The purpose of the interviews was two-fold. The first was to elicit information from participants about their activities (for example, to unearth contexts unbeknown to the investigator which participants felt to have effected their behaviour). In this sense, interviews were treated as providing situated, but partial, accounts of what was going on, rather than objective information about it (Alvesson, 1996; Crevani, 2011). A second purpose of the interviews was to explore the discursive strategies participants employed, with interviewee’s

accounts considered to be “not a window on social reality but [...] a part, a sample of that reality” (Czarniawska, 2004, p.49).

Data from PO and the interviews were used interdependently with prior observations having an effect on the interpretation of interview responses and, contrariwise, interview responses leading to different inferences about observations (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007). In line with this paper’s aforementioned social constructionist epistemology, respondent’s accounts were not ‘cross-checked’ for evidence of validity (a strategy which positivist researchers may employ), rather, accounts were treated as social events which are shaped by context.

### **3.3. Sampling**

The site for this research, a UK luxury goods company anonymised as ‘Jewell’, was purposively sampled. Two department stores named in conversations were also anonymised as ‘Glisten’ and ‘Shimmer’.

A gatekeeper (who was not a meeting attendee or interviewee) facilitated access to an employee who had responsibility for organising sales and education team meetings. Following discussions with the gatekeeper and this employee, a sales and education team meeting was attended. The sampling of a team defined as “a group of people who ‘share accountability for the produced action’ (Djordjilovic, 2012, p. 113) within a meeting, defined as “a communicative event involving three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or a group...” (Schwartzman, 1989, p.7), was expected to yield rich multi-logue and dialogue data.

Participants were opportunistically sampled (i.e. team members were not sampled according to ‘face-sheet categories’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.37) such as seniority, age, or experience). In keeping with the stated aims for this paper, sampling did not draw on “ethnographic knowledge of the social contexts, such as social hierarchies, personal knowledge about the actors or “official” goals of an action under observation” (Knoblauch, 2005, p.131).

All attendees in the meeting were contacted one week later to see if they would be willing to be interviewed. One week was considered a sensible time frame to allow for sufficient time to pass for events to occur after, or because of, the meeting, but also to enable participants to recollect and reflect on the meeting and the events that preceded it. Six of the eight attendees agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were pre-structured to the extent that general questions were prepared in advance. However the sequence of the questions was not fixed. This was to facilitate a flexible approach whereby the researcher and the informant could shape the



path of their interaction. Non-directive, relatively open-ended questions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.118) such as *"Thinking back to last week could you tell me what was going on around the time of the meeting?"* were asked (see Appendix 2).

### **3.4. Recording**

Attendees' naturally occurring conversations were recorded by the researcher using a dictaphone and through the taking of field notes. All attendees gave consent to this. The dictaphone was placed in the middle of the meeting table so attendees could see they were being recorded and to give all attendees an equal chance to have their contributions recorded. The use of video recording during the meeting was explored, but this was not possible due to a failure to gain consent for this from all participants.

Field notes were taken throughout the meeting. These notes documented the main issues and topics being discussed and any notable linguistic devices, for example particular phrases or sayings, which appeared, for example, to shift or sustain attendees' emphasis on these issues and topics. Attendees' non-verbal communication, for example smiles, raised eyebrows, and gesticulations, were also noted for the same reasons. These notations were accompanied by a time stamp to enable the researcher to locate noteworthy verbal and non-verbal communication when listening back to the recording and reading the transcript.

A seating plan which mapped the positions of all attendees in the meeting, including the researcher, was also drawn in the field notes. This plan included the names of attendees and any notable features of attendee's appearance. This map enabled the researcher to remember who was who in the meeting and to locate which attendees were in the researchers sight lines. The plan also enabled the researcher to reflect on who, including the researcher, could hear who in the meeting most easily. Attendees' seating positions in the room were important to document because these too could be included in the analysis when considering who was communicating to who and how, for example through facial expressions, they were doing so. Alongside the seating plan any notable features of the room, such as advertisements and products, were also noted. This addition was thought important because it enabled the researcher to remember what attendees were looking at, in addition to who they were looking at, when communicating.

Interviews were conducted, about one week after the meeting, with six of the eight meeting attendees over the telephone. Telephone interviews were used because the diary commitments of many of the attendees meant they were travelling and were unable to be interviewed face-to-face. The advantage of this approach was that it enabled a relatively short time period elapse to after the meeting which meant attendees were less likely to forget about the meeting. The disadvantage of this approach was however, that unlike in the

meeting, interviewees' non-verbal communication could not be interpreted. The interviews were audio recorded, with the interviewees consent, and notes were taken. These notes included probes for instances when the interviewer wished for clarification or for the interviewee to elaborate further on their response.

The recording of the meeting was sent to a transcription agency. The advantage of this was that it enabled the transcript to be returned to the researcher in a relatively short space of time. This enabled it (the meeting transcript) to be analysed in conjunction with the interview transcripts, which were transcribed by the researcher. The disadvantage of using an agency is the potential for the recording to be misrepresented during the transcription, a potential which is possibly higher than if the researcher, who was present during the meeting and made field notes about it, had transcribed it. To mitigate this risk the researcher listened to the recording and read the transcript, simultaneously, several times to correct any errors. The field notes, and the time stamped additions, were also used for this purpose when necessary.

### ***3.5. Coding and Analysis***

It is important to outline the abductive logic (Taylor and Van Every, 2011) which informed the iterative process of coding, analysing and interpreting the data. Abductive logic is “not ‘transcendental’, a search for an unchanging or universal truth but ‘constitutive’” (Taylor and Van Every, 2011, p.20). The approach to analysis was therefore neither deductive (“a purely logical inferential procedure, inspired by an undisputed set of premises” p.20) nor inductive (“simply a classification of our impressions” p.20). Adopting this logic meant the researcher was open to, but not restricted by, the interpretations of relational leadership they had previously reviewed. More specifically this meant the researcher was open to considering past scholars, such as Crevani et al's. (2010) conceptualisations of leadership as the (re)forming of direction in conversations. However, such studies did not limit the researcher's inference of what leadership may “look” like in the data, if indeed it was inferred as being present at all. Pre-defined categories of what leadership looked like were therefore not searched for, as for example, Interaction Analysts may do with a priori coding schemes (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). Like Crevani et al. (2010) and Crevani (2011), the researcher therefore asked open questions of the data such as “what is going on here? And, what is being constructed here?”.

The meeting recording and transcript were repeatedly and simultaneously listened to and read by the researcher. Following this familiarisation the researcher's field notes were, where appropriate, added to the transcript with, for example, non-verbal communication added and memorable phrases or sayings which caught the observer's attention highlighted. Following the amalgamation of the field notes with the transcripts the transcripts were repeatedly read and re-read. This led to the identification of several themes in

the data; coping, learning, planning, implementing, selling, educating and positive thinking. These themes were then re-read and coded under three main themes; events, problems, and opportunities.

These main themes were then re-read numerous times. Informed by the approach to analysis taken by Nicholson and Carroll (2013) and Crevani et al. (2010), the linguistic features present within these themes were then analysed. Linguistic features were explored to see what attendee's discourses were 'doing', not only what they were representing. Following these authors the researcher paid close attention to, for example, attendees use of verbs (which may indicate movement in the direction of the conversation), pronouns (to interpret agency and power in the direction of the conversation), and metaphors (to interpret the richness, subtleties and nuances in the direction of the conversation).

Conversation analysis was considered but not used in this analysis because the researcher was interested more in the performative effect of what conversations 'do' rather than exploring the "institutionalized substratum of interactional rules, procedures, and conventions through which orderly and intelligible social interaction is made possible" (Goodwin and Heritage, 1990, p.283). In addition, it should be noted that, when looking at the use of and the effect of pronouns no attempt was made to connect movements in agency and power to wider societal practices, or vice-versa, as may be done, for example, by critical discourse analysts (Phillips and Oswick, 2012).

Across the three themes identified, attendees' use of and reaction to linguistic devices was inferred as 'doing' things and 'performing'. Two main 'performances' were coded within and across these themes. The first performance inferred was when the use of linguistic devices within attendees' talk about events, problems, and opportunities also appeared to focus and engage attendees' attention towards another business issue. This performance was coded as an issue. Following identification of the issue code further analysis was undertaken of the linguistic features present within this code. This analysis led to the identification of two sub-codes; the widening out of a business issue (i.e. attendees' talk about events, problems, and opportunities were inferred as being of wider relevance: to others, to the meeting, and to the wider business environment). The second sub-code was the narrowing down of a business issue (i.e. attendees' talk about events, problems, and opportunities were inferred as being of relevance to only select attendees).

The second performance inferred was when, again through attendees' use of and reaction to linguistic devices, attendees' talk about events, problems, and opportunities were inferred as positioning themselves and colleagues in terms of: their roles and responsibilities in relation to each other, departments and the business. These performances were coded as positionings. Further analysis of the linguistic features within this code was then undertaken. This led to the identification of two sub-codes: the creating of a hierarchy (i.e.

attendees' talk about problems, events, and opportunities were inferred as positioning select attendees as being able to contribute to or affect business issues). The second sub-code was the concertinaing of a hierarchy (i.e. attendees' talk about problems, events, and opportunities were inferred as positioning most or all attendees as being able to contribute to or affect business issues).

The interview transcripts were read to provide contextual information about the themes identified (for example sales revenue information) in the meeting transcript. This contextual information was considered when analysing the linguistic features present within these themes.

### ***3.6. Interpretation***

The performances, apparent within the three main themes, were inferred as producing direction in the meeting through producing various business issues and positioning attendees, to greater or lesser extents, in relation to these issues. This was inferred as temporarily enabling potential future actions for some attendees whilst disabling future actions for other attendees. Like Crevani et al. (2010) and Crevani (2011), this 'opening up and closing down' of potential future actions was interpreted as the conversation rather than individuals doing 'leadership', by directing some attendees more so than others through making some courses of action more possible, probable, and intelligible or not (Crevani, 2011).

## **4. Findings**

Drawing on the analytical approaches of Nicholson and Carroll (2013) and Crevani et al. (2010), field notes, meeting transcripts and interview transcripts were analysed to investigate actors' use of language in interactions and to explore the performative effect of interactions. The analysis was concerned with what interactions 'do' (Hosking, 2007). This is in contrast to the work of researchers undertaking conversation analysis who attempt to uncover the "institutionalized substratum of interactional rules, procedures, and conventions through which orderly and intelligible social interaction is made possible" (Goodwin and Heritage, 1990, p.283).

To explore the performative and perlocutionary effect of interactions this paper took a keen interest in actors' use of linguistic features (e.g. verbs, pronouns, and metaphors) and whether these features created movements in, for example, power and agency within conversations. However, no attempt was made to

connect such movements within conversations to wider social practices or vice-versa as would be done, for example, by critical discourse analysts (Phillips and Oswick, 2012). In addition, the analysis was not concerned with ‘who’ (i.e. an actor’s role) was performing in the interaction or attempting to explore ‘why’ (i.e. their intentionality) they were performing.

In the extracts below it is proposed that within actors’ talk, direction is being (re)produced through the ongoing relational construction and reconstruction of issues and positions. As conversations travel, issues appear to be constructed and *widened out* (i.e. topics relevant to one or a few actors are constructed as being of relevance to more actors, to the meeting, to the organisation, and to the wider business environment) and *narrowed down* (i.e. topics concerning the organisation, the wider business environment are constructed as being of relevance to one or a few actors). The co-construction and co-reconstruction of issues focus actors’ attention through the opening up or closing down of social realities and are interpreted as producing moments of leadership.

The extracts below also highlight how actors’ conversations *extend and concertina hierarchy* within the meeting. Actors’ talk appears to position themselves and others in terms of their roles and responsibilities in relation to departments in the business and to the business itself. The relational construction and reconstruction of hierarchy is interpreted as creating and constraining actors’ opportunities to participate in, and to affect, social realities and is viewed as (re)producing direction and leadership moments. Linguistic devices appear, at times, to assist in shifting the constructions of issues from the micro to the macro (and vice versa) and in extending and concertinaing hierarchy (and vice versa).

### *Extract 1*

The first extract highlights how in the opening exchanges of the two hour meeting, Ollie, Max and Zoe’s dialogue constructs two social realities; what the meetings focus will be, and what the month of May’s focus will be.

Ollie                    “So, we’ll touch, quickly, on April – I don’t want to touch too much, because, again, as we come into May, this meeting is all about May and how we... how we get our... you know, get our position back to where we need to be. We were a negative – we know we were on a negative. It was a... you know, a high number, at minus 35, so, we’re still, you know, far behind where we should be, and the business is, you know, suffering as a result year to

date. And apart from Bill, you know, we're all in the red, at the moment – Bill's at plus 2, still holding his ground. Emma, you've gone to flat, but we're holding, holding, holding in there. And the other guys, unfortunately, we've slipped into a negative, so we've got a great opportunity in May and in June. And we've talked about those figures, on and on and on, and now it's time to make it happen.

Max                    Because we think that May is going to be our money-making month.

Ollie                   We know it's going to be our money-making month.

Zoe                    Money-making May.

Ollie                   Money-making May. That's officially what we have called it. It's money-making May.

Max                    Because for us it can mean that we, actually, are going to bank, this month, an extra £500,000.

Ollie                   Yep

Connor                Erm

Max                    Not just in London,

Ollie                   No

Max                    It would be nice if it is.

[Group laughter]

Max                    It would be nice to get you four all back on bonus – that's what we want for this final quarter.

Ollie                    Absolutely

Max                    I have to say, I'm really excited about this next two months, not only as Ollie said, because of all the activity, but also, as well, our new partner in crime, who... it's like, almost my perfect partner, because I've worked with her before.

Zoe                    I've cracked out the good stuff for you guys.

[Group laughter]

Zoe                    You know why? It's the guys – they know me, I'd better step it up".

Max's "Because we think" supplement supports Ollie's construction that "this meeting is all about May", with Ollie's more assured response, "We know", giving traction to and *narrowing down* what the priority this month will be.

Zoe's next comment, "Money-making May", sustains the conversation's flow in shaping the predominant focus of the meeting to be about one thing. Her usage of an adjectival phrase, "Money-making", sustains Ollie and Max's previous comments and qualifies the following noun "May" as no longer being 'just a month'. Ollie's repetition of this alliterative phrase seems to make it all the more impactful and builds upon and further narrows down these three actors' relational performance around setting the meeting's focus.

Interestingly, Ollie's use of "officially" seems to evoke a legitimacy behind these actors' performance. At this juncture an authoritative power seems to join the conversation and gives credence to the performance the actors have relationally given so far. Max's next comment further strengthens the proposed direction for the month ahead with the £500,000 figure providing a quantitative insight about what success would look like for this social reality. The incremental co-construction of "Money-making May", along with the repetition and coupling of this phrase with the power of authority, is interpreted as narrowing down social realities for attendees by making it seemingly hard to refute that the focus of the meeting and the month can only be about one thing; making money.

In light of Zoe and Ollie's interview responses this narrowing of realities may be viewed as an example of the importance of presenting a unified "we" (sales and education) message to the group. For example when asked "*What were the important matters that were going on in the run up to the meeting?*" Zoe's response during her interview revealed the lack of an education presence within the meeting for quite some time;

*"I've come back to the brand after a seven year sabbatical, no, seven years with another brand"*

*"There has been no education management for eleven months which is a long period of time for you to have the sales voice"*

Similarly, Ollie's response to the question "*would you say the meeting was similar to other meetings that the team has?*" constructed Zoe's addition to the team as bringing a new "educational message";

*"...Zoe. She's our new education manager, so she brings a different dynamic to the meetings, whereas myself and Max tend to be more sales led and strategy led, she's very much an educational message"*

In Zoe's response, and to an extent in Ollie's response, a scenario is being constructed whereby attendees have predominantly heard one voice in these meetings; sales. Zoe returns to the issue of voice later in her interview. Here the importance of two voices, education and sales, being heard as "one" in the meeting is emphasised;

*"I think going forward it will be a more seamless one voice, but I actually felt that myself, Ollie and Max worked well together and we all seemed to be on the same message... my previous company it was just sales-education, sales-education it was always one voice and I worked very hard on that...relationship I suppose, because you never want to fight the two, else it doesn't work"*

"Money-making May" could also be constructing a social reality whereby actors are "on the same message". The construction of two departments wanting the same thing for the meeting and for the month appears to further narrow down a social reality by producing direction for attendees.



There also seems to be a *creation of hierarchy* within extract 1. Ollie's opening to the meeting describes how "we were a negative" for April. Who "we" is referring to is narrowed down by the apparent separation of "we" from the business; with the latter being described as "suffering as a result, year to date" because of the actions of the former. Who is (i.e. the "other guys") contributing to the sub-standard performance is then alluded to with Ollie's positioning of two actors, Bill and Emma, as sales people who have not "slipped into a negative" with Bill positioned as having a positive sales return and Emma positioned as breaking even. Following the "Money-making May" performance and Max's quantification of the month, the conversation then flows back towards who among the attendees needs to make money in "May" with Max's comment "it would be nice to get you four back on bonus - that's what we want..." again positioning specific individuals. Thus, at this juncture, half of the eight attendees are being positioned as sales people who are not hitting target and one attendee is being positioned as hitting target. The other three attendees' talk appears to be relationally producing direction by further *narrowing down* a social reality whereby some actors are being positioned as having responsibility for making the social reality of "Money Making May" achievable.

This separation of 'us' from 'them' appears to be further strengthened with Max's positioning of Zoe to the group ("our new partner in crime") and to himself ("my perfect partner"). Zoe's holding of her dress and her look across the table whilst commenting "I've cracked out the good stuff for you guys" in conjunction with the group's subsequent laughter suggests Zoe is taking up the first of Max's positionings by aligning herself somewhat to either some or all of the attendees. Zoe's "It's the guys - they know me, I'd better step it up" comment appears to position the group further by indicating that they are worthy enough for her to make an effort with her physical appearance.

It appears that the delineation between 'us' and 'them' formed at the beginning of the extract is being shifted somewhat. Zoe's talk and others' reaction to it appears to be repositioning actors as a whole, not around who has or has not got responsibilities for hitting sales targets. A *concertinaing of hierarchy* appears to be being performed with actors' positions being reconstructed and with this new positioning so too are the expectations about who should contribute to social realities, realities which had previously been *narrowed down*.

## *Extract 2*

Later in the meeting, Zoe and Bill are discussing a specific event that concerns them. This event then appears to broaden out to construct an issue that is of relevance to the wider group before the conversation narrows again and returns to this specific event.

Zoe            “So, I’m hoping that today we can have a really honest conversation about what you guys really need, what you think the quick wins are for education, and also, long-term, what you would like to see in the future.

Bill            I think the great thing is now, ‘Glisten’ is a slightly different place to what it was a few years ago, and hopefully we could get you in-store, with us

Zoe            That would be

Bill            That would brilliant.

Zoe            That would be amazing. I’m really hoping that would...

Bill            Yeah

Zoe            That would be feasible.

Bill            Yes, because that’s where we’ve struggled, over the years. You know, when Gerard was with us, he was never allowed in, because the store wouldn’t let him in, and they’re taking a completely different view on it, down there, now.

Max            I think the business is changing everywhere, and we are adapting to it. And just because we did something yesterday,

Bill            Exactly

Max               Doesn't mean we're going to do it tomorrow, because life has change, like, and the city has changed.

Zoe               Yeah

Max               I think, now, I know London today, but I don't know what the hell is going to happen tomorrow.

Bill               Yeah

Connor           Erm [Confirmatory]

Max               So therefore, we've got to keep pacey and ahead; and,

Zoe               Yeah

Max               And, you know, as well, recover quicker [*Max clicks fingers*].

Connor           Erm [Confirmatory]

Max               And I think that's... but, however, you know, I think what it needs is only one good week, and then suddenly... then, the cycle of success comes your way.

Connor           Erm [Confirmatory]

Zoe               Yeah

Max               And as we always like to say, even diamonds need polishing. So, you know, now, there's the power of three

Zoe               Yeah

Max                    Which those of you who wish to remember...

[Group laughter]

Ollie                  One, two, three. [points to Max, Zoe, himself]

Max                    Not sure in that order. Ollie's the most important one. We're just accessories.

Zoe                    Yeah, we're just his back-up singers

Max                    And we can dance.

Ollie                   I can sing.

Max                    Well, we saw a bit of evidence of that last week, but I think you also do have to remember the 'Jewell' tradition of smile and have fun. And when, actually, you do, what happens?

Bill                    Take money

Max                    You take money.

Zoe                    And you can't even work out how it's happening.

Max                    I know sometimes

Zoe                    Someone comes in, they see you've had an amazing day. Like, I don't know what's going on – it's just non-stop. I'm going have to come into your store.

Bill                    It'd be good. Because, you know, we've struggled with just getting even, like... area managers have never been allowed in there. But, as I say, it's changing now, so, you know, they're being a bit more lenient, and a bit more willing to go in, and letting people in the door, now, so... which is brilliant.

Zoe                    Well, I'll get my red lips on and I'll...

Ollie                 And the highest of heels.

Zoe                    Yeah, I'd love to. Yeah, the highest of heels. I'd love to be... my thing is find out what it's like on the ground, and find out what your customers are saying, and what... you know, what they love, what they're not as keen on, having to change that attitude. So, yes, being in-store is really important to me.

Bill                    Sure

Zoe                    Yeah, as soon as poss."

Bill's "hopefully we could get you in-store with us" response to Zoe's "quick win for education" appears to narrow down an example of what constitutes a "quick win"; getting 'education' access into a department store which they had formerly been denied. At this moment the focus of the conversation has been narrowed by these two actors' talk; to the "in-store" and "down there".

The trajectory of the conversation then shifts with Max's comment "I think the business is changing everywhere..." This comment *broadens out* the focus of Zoe and Bill's talk about a specific event exchange and moves the conversation to a more macro focus of "the business". Bill and Zoe's confirmatory responses appear to support this assertion that their in-store situation is a microcosm of other events in "the business", "the city" and "in London". With this broadening of focus, direction appears to be being produced with Max's talk constructing a reality whereby, in order to keep up with the changing business landscape, attendees need to "keep pacey and ahead" and to "recover quicker". Bill, Zoe and Connor's confirmatory interjections appear to sustain these constructions.

Max's "the cycle of success" comment appears to further broaden the conversation, with Bill, Zoe and Connor's responses appearing to sustain and give credence to Max's construction that, by remaining vigilant and reacting to the changing business environment, attendees can experience a "cycle of success" (i.e. success that has longevity) and not just a "quick win". At this juncture it appears actors' talk has extrapolated

Bill and Zoe's talk about a specific event to be of wider relevance to other actors within the meeting and is constructing a social reality. This construction and the positioning of actors needing to be reactive too if they are to be successful is interpreted as a further instance of the actors' talk producing direction and creating a leadership moment.

Max's use of a metaphor, "even diamonds need polishing", in his next comment could be interpreted as referring to the previous point himself, Zoe, Bill and Connor have co-constructed around not taking the changing business landscape for granted. Max's finishing off this sentence with "now, there's the power of three", and the subsequent responses from Ollie and Zoe may, however, give it an alternative interpretation.

Ollie's pointing to Zoe, Max and then himself whilst uttering "One, two, three" suggests the conversation is being taken down a different track. At this juncture the conversation appears to be returning to an *extension of hierarchy* that was present in the first extract. Max's response, "Not sure in that order. Ollie's the most important one. We're just his accessories", suggests that, although Ollie's configuration of the "power of three" may not be 'correct', this phrase and the responses to it are positioning these three actors as being of importance. The subsequent comments by Zoe, "back-up singers", coupled with Max and Ollie's comments "And we can dance" and "And I can sing" serves to reinforce these actors' as being in a clique. The evocation of them as performers on a stage signals to other attendees their interdependence to one another in delivering a performance.

Some interviewees' talk *about* the meeting similarly appeared to construct a hierarchy among these three actors. For example, when asked whether this meeting stood out as being similar or different to previous meetings the team has in anyway, Ollie commented;

*"...so that's the first time we've had a bit of an education-led meeting in such detail and going forward she will have an hour or so in each of those meetings purely to focus on education"*

Similarly, when asked the same question Zoe noted the importance of her increasing her usual input to meetings;

*“I would say historically in my previous companies it would be more of a 50/50 split of education and sales, whereas this I kind of was a bit pushy but I felt I needed to push the education piece because it had been missing”*

When asked whether his involvement in the meeting was similar to his usual participation in these team meetings, Max too acknowledged how Zoe’s addition meant his typical contribution had been revised;

*“It was probably less, because of the fact that, erm, I would have covered the pieces that Zoe took, yeah.”*

However, in the future the share of voice present in this meeting was predicted to shift somewhat, as indicated by Ollie’s comment;

*“I think going forward that would be the standard that I would normally participate in, about 60% participation from me and 40% education from her”.*

Zoe’s positioning and repositioning within the “power of three” in conjunction with interview constructions about actors’ roles within the meeting is interesting. In the interviews actors’ roles are being constructed as either having shifted or they will be shifting due to Zoe’s arrival. These constructions in the meeting and in the interviews can be construed as an example of the sales department and the education department being constructed as having similar importance and as having an interdependency in order to function.

Following the widening out of a social reality and the extension of a hierarchy, the conversation appears to once again make a shift in trajectory. Zoe’s comment, “Someone comes in...”, is interesting because in this moment she appears to be adopting the persona of a customer who is in store and sees the sales associates having “an amazing day”. It is unclear whether she is remaining within the customer persona in her next line “I’m going to have to come into your store”, or whether this line is returning the conversation to the specific in-store access situation she was earlier discussing with Bill.

Bill’s “It’d be good. Because, you know, we’ve struggled...” comment appears to narrow the focus of who Zoe’s comment was referring to. At this juncture these two actors appear to have returned the conversation to their specific exchange around an event and away from the construction of the changing business environment. The conversation shifts again with Zoe drawing on her previous positioning around appearance

to position herself again, “Well, I’ll get my red lips on and I’ll...”. This positioning can be interpreted as a way of making the social reality (of getting in store access achievable). Ollie’s following comment “And the highest of heels” also appears to use Zoe’s positioning of herself as a way for her to make this reality happen.

In extract 2 the conversation constructs several social realities. At the beginning of the extract a “quick win” is constructed around an event concerning two actors, before this event is constructed as being indicative of the wider and changing world of business. This widening of a social reality was constructed as having implications for actors and positioned them as needing to be reactive and adaptive to this changing world. Following the extension and construction of hierarchy in extract 1 a hierarchy appears to extend again in this extract. Zoe and Bill’s exchange then appeared to narrow the conversation again to their specific situation, with Zoe and Ollie returning to Zoe’s positioning around appearance in extract 1. This positioning appears to be used as a way to make the “quick win” of obtaining access into a store achievable.

### *Extract 3*

In the third extract Bill is describing a previous situation of a sales counter located “downstairs” in a department store that had “really struggled” in comparison to its previous year’s sales performance..

Bill                    “Well, we got Beauty room downstairs, and we’ve got a shop bit down there, and it really struggled because the year before there was a phenomenal year, down there – they put through some really large sales, so we were up against big numbers.

Max                    Without us doing anything.

Ollie                    Yeah, it was ‘Glisten’s’ own bought team.

Bill                    So, that was where we were struggling – we were up against big numbers. And we’ve been, sort of, probably around the £1,000, £2,000 mark – last week they took £8,000 down there,

Zoe                    Wow



Connor                      Wow

Bill                            And it was just really, sort of, remerchandising. Obviously, there were new products down there, there were some men-sets down there, and I know the guys down there, I've been going down more and more regularly, now, just checking on them and just seeing if there's anything we can do for them – you know really being

Ollie                           Engaged.

Bill                            Being a bit more honest, a bit more interactive with them and a bit more engaged with them, which... if I put my hands up to that... But last week, it took, you know, just over £8,000, which...

Ollie                           Which adds onto your week.

Bill                            Yes, it did absolutely...

Ollie                           But, again, guys, you know, we look at that weakness – we've got to be realistic, you know, about what we're doing. And if it's not right, and if we're not doing what we need to, let's address it and get it right. There's nothing wrong with looking at something and thinking, you know what, I probably dropped the ball on it.

Connor                      Erm [Confirmatory]

Bill                            Yeah

Ollie                           That's fine – just pick it up again. Now's the time to do it.

Bill                            That's exactly what's happened, down there.

Max                            It's called a granular opportunity,

Bill                      Yeah

Max                      Which we have to look for”.

Zoe and Connor’s “wow” to Bill’s description of how sales had shifted “£1,000, £2,000 mark – last week they took £8,000 down there” constructs the latter figure as being impressive and reinforces Bill’s construction of the store experiencing a resurgence in sales of late.

Bill’s description of “down there” on the counter then turns to his personal involvement with it; “I’ve been going down more and more regularly, now, just checking on them and just seeing if there’s anything we can do for them – you know really being..” Ollie’s finishing off of Bill’s line with “Engaged” is interesting because at this juncture in the conversation Ollie’s comment appears to position Bill based on an attribute, engagement, with this attribute being constructed as the reason for the downturn and then the uplift in sales. Bill’s “...puts my hands up to that” comment gives credence to Ollie’s positioning of him around his attributes of being honest, interactive and engaged.

Later in the conversation, Ollie’s use of metaphors in the lines “There’s nothing wrong with looking at something and thinking, you know what, I probably dropped the ball on it” and “That’s fine, just pick it [the ball] up again” appears to widen out a social reality for the group; that mistakes occur, identify them and then rectify them. Through his response, “That’s exactly what’s happened down there,” Bill seems to be referring to his experience “down there” on the sales counter. At this point in the conversation Bill’s talk seems to be positioning his previous disengagement as “dropping the ball” and his reengagement as “picking it back up again”. In this exchange direction appears to be being produced with a specific problem (disengagement) being constructed into an issue that has wider applicability to other actors.

The construction of Bill’s disengagement and subsequent reengagement into an issue that has applicability for others is interesting when considering how he is positioned as being different from the other four attendees who are positioned as having individual sales responsibilities. As extract 1 highlighted, Bill is positioned as the only sales attendee who is making pluses, a construction that is similar to the one provided in Connor’s interview;

Interviewer;            *“Would you say that your involvement, that your input to the meeting was similar to your usual involvement with the meetings?”*

Connor;           *"...Yeah pretty much we share sort of the amount of talking. I don't know if you noticed but like 'Glisten' did a lot of talking like Bill did a lot of talking and that's because he's number one account, so there's a lot of expectation..."*

The construction of Bill as a 'star performer' in extract 1 and in Connor's interview may make Ollie and Bill's construction of how other actors' should learn from Bill's experience all the more impactful for attendees.

#### *Extract 4*

Towards the close of the meeting Sophia is describing how a store in which she works had operational difficulties with the closure of the customer services function.

Sophia           Last week, the store closed the customer service, and there has been a big issue with giving the VAT receipts for customers. They have... in the store, they have only two books, to finish the VAT receipts, so it was a massive problem in the store. So, customers are going to get angry, say, I'm not going to shop here, I'm going buy at the airport, where I can get my duty back. But this is resolving now, and I find [overtalking].

Bill               What, they closed customer services?

Sophia           Yes, it's not available any more, in 'Shimmer' [overtalking].

Bill               So, how can you have a store without customer services?

[Laughter of disbelief from some attendees]

Max              The thing is though, everyone can take responsibility for being a customer services manager.

Connor            Absolutely yeah

Sophia            We have to [overtalking] for customers, everything, now, but the tills are... [unclear] tills were not working properly, and we couldn't issue VAT receipts, so we have to do it manually, we have to change the book, every morning, every single time.

Ollie              Well, that's more time for our customers to spend on our counters. As a... as a... as a hopeful opportunity

[Laughter from Ollie].

Ollie              Okay. Well, we're going to move on now, guys,

Following Sophia's description of the closure of customer services in one store, Bill and Sophia's dialogue appears to widen out the specific problem Sophia faced in store into an issue that has wider implication for other actors and for other stores. The laughter that ensues from some attendees to the scenario Sophia faces suggests there is an air of disbelief and empathy from some actors towards Sophia with regards to the situation she found herself in. At this moment direction appears to be being produced whereby having a department store without a customer service function is almost unthinkable.

The conversation takes a further turn with Max's comment, "The thing is though...", reconstructing this social reality. Max's comment constructs a reality whereby customer services is portrayed as a part of every worker's role in the company and not solely the responsibility of one function within a store. Connor's response appears to give this construction some credence. Sophia's talk then appears to redirect the conversation back to her specific situation in store, "we couldn't issue VAT receipts, so we have to do it manually...", before Ollie constructs another social reality by widening out Sophia's account as being of relevance to other actors, "Well, that's more time for our customers to spend on our counters...".

What is particularly interesting about extract 4 is how direction is produced through the construction of two divergent social realities (customer service is part of a function versus customer service is part of everyone's role). Ollie's "hopeful opportunity" comment also appears to construct a further social reality for the group,

similar to Bill's example in extract 3, whereby what once was considered a negative can be turned into a positive.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. *Widening out and narrowing down social realities*

The findings presented here highlight how *events, problems and opportunities* present within actors' conversations became constructed and reconstructed into issues. Similar to the studies by Crevani and colleagues, the issues presented in the four extracts in this paper assumed importance, engaged actors and focused their attention. In addition, this paper's findings also appeared to produce direction by *widening out* or *narrowing down social realities* for actors, with some aspects becoming important and others not. "Reality" was therefore produced in "certain directions" (Crevani, 2011) and moments of leadership emerged.

In extracts 2 and 4 for example, *events* were being talked about and became constructed into issues by focusing the attention of the wider group. In extract 2 the store access situation was constructed by actors' talk as being an example or, to use Lindgren and Packendorff's (2011) terminology, a "building-block" (p.165) from which a social reality was opened up (the changing world of business) and to which actors' had to remain vigilant and adapt to. In extract 4, a lack of customer services in one store was another example of how an event constructed reality in certain directions. Using Gergen's (1994) act+ supplement theory facilitated an exploration of how issues become constructed in divergent directions (Crevani et al., 2010) rather than in a collective direction. The four extracts presented in this paper therefore give an alternative conceptualisation to Drath et al's (2008) proposal that direction is produced by and for a collective.

*Problems*, such as the past month's disappointing sales figures in extract 1 and an actor's previous lack of engagement (extract 3), were also talked about. These problems were then constructed into issues with, for example, in extract 1 two social realities being constructed which focused actors' attention; the focus of the meeting and the focus for the month ahead. Similarly in extract 3, one actor's previous lack of engagement was talked about as a problem (i.e. poor sales figures ensued as a result of this). However, this problem was also constructed into a moment where direction was produced as this actor's example of disengaging and then reengaging was constructed to be an example from which other attendees could learn.

## 5.2. Positioning and hierarchy

As Crevani (2011) and Packendorff et al. (2014) found in their studies, what is particularly interesting about the conversation presented in extract 3 is how actors are being positioned based on personal attributes and on what kind of person one is expected to be. The previous construction of Bill in extract 1 and in some of the interviews as being the leading sales performer makes his mistake and subsequent rectification (i.e. disengagement and reengagement, and the ability to admit to and learn from the first in order to display the second) all the more impactful as a moment of producing direction and leadership. This example could be considered to be a case where other sales performers are being positioned in comparison to this actor's position. In addition, for sales actors to make a contribution to the making money construction in extract 1, they need to display these personal attributes and qualities too.

Gergen's (1994) act+ supplement theory enabled the exploration of how the positioning of an actor in relation to others in extract 1 was reinforced by an interpretation made in extract 3. In extract 1 it appears that the construction of the social reality of making money in the month ahead is being narrowed down and that *some actors are being positioned as being culpable for poor sales performance* in the previous month and for having responsibility for reversing this trend. Thus, the positioning of four of the attendees in extract 1 as not hitting target, and the positioning of Bill in extracts 1 and 3 and in some of the subsequent interviews as hitting target, appears to present these actors as having a sales role within the organisation. This again *positions actors as having responsibility for contributing to a social reality; to make money.*

In extract 1, the positioning of the other three actors as wanting the actors who have sales responsibility to contribute to this social reality can, using act+ supplement theory, be considered to be *positioning who is expected to make a contribution to social realities*. The sales-education 'one voice' positioning in extract 2 and in the interviews in conjunction with the positioning of the "power of three" in extract 2, can be interpreted *as extending and reinforcing the hierarchy* created in extract 1. Similar to the findings of Crevani (2011), actors' talk in extract 2 was not only positioning specific actors in relation to one another; talk also positioned departments within the organisation in relation to one another.

Within the extracts it appears there is a subtlety through which leadership positions are emerging. Through widening out and narrowing down social realities some actors are being positioned as being responsible for making a contribution to these realities. Actors' are being positioned as: having to draw on their personal qualities; having to remain vigilant about the wider business landscape; and having to reconceptualise the responsibilities that fall under their role. Through these positionings a social organisational hierarchy appears

to be extended and concertinaed in an ongoing process with actors' talk producing leadership moments and, at times, some actors' talk leading others.

### ***5.3. Linguistic devices, producing direction, and positioning***

Interpreting the relational (re)producing of direction within conversations as a micro-process of leadership provides researchers with an opportunity to explore whether language games (Pondy, 1978) are being relationally played in actors' talk, and how they are being played. In his language games thesis Pondy notes "The dual capacity to make sense of things and to put them into language meaningful to large numbers of people gives the person who has it enormous leverage" (p.95). By adopting a perlocutionary view of language and exploring the effect of its use (rather than the intention behind its use), one can interpret whether, through actors' speech, acts and supplements certain acts have relational leverage in leveraging a social reality and/or a subject positioning (Davies and Harré, 1990).

In some of the extracts presented in this paper linguistic devices and phrases do appear to leverage issues and positions. In extract 3, for example, the meaning from the metaphorical expression "dropped the ball" was derived from the phrase (i.e. making a mistake) rather than the individual words within the phrase. This metaphor appeared to leverage an issue around admitting and learning from mistakes by acting as a summary and an assessment of Bill's disengagement and reengagement. This finding draws parallels with previous research by Drew and Holt (1988; 1998) and Holt and Drew (2005). These studies found figurative devices were recurrently associated with bringing talk about some matter to a close, and often acted as assessments by glossing details within that talk in either a positive or a negative light. The expression "dropped the ball" appears to be both closing off Bill's description about his experience in store and it appears to be glossing Bill's account in a positive light; that the group should not be afraid to admit to, and learn from, their mistakes. To use Pondy's (1978) terminology, it appears the use of metaphor is leveraging issues and creating positions for actors.

Another interesting similarity between this paper's findings and Drew and Holt's (1988; 1998) and Holt and Drew's (2010) findings is apparent in extract 3. In this extract the conversation appears to be travelling along a similar pattern to the one identified by these scholars. In this pattern a figurative summary from speaker A is agreed on by speaker B; speaker A provides confirmation before either speaker A or B glosses details of the talk and moves the conversation along to a new topic. A similar pattern is witnessed in this extract with Ollie's figurative summary closing and giving a gloss to the topic of disengagement and reengagement. However, in this extract a third speaker, Max, enters the conversation to provide confirmation, "It's called a

granular opportunity...which we have to look out for". Though not identical to the pattern identified in previous studies, the use of a figurative expression in extract 3 does appear to facilitate a summary of talk and to move the conversation on to a new topic. Drew and Holt's patterns were identified from a corpus of British and American family telephone conversations. Following the identification of a similar pattern in this paper, within a workplace meeting, it would be interesting to explore whether Drew and Holt's patterns emerged in other workplace meetings.

In extract 2 another interesting use of language appeared to assist in the leveraging of social realities and the positioning of actors. The phrase "the power of three", and its subsequent appropriation by Ollie, Zoe and Max, positioned them as close to one another and in doing so marked them out as different from others. The use of this phrase is particularly interesting when taking into consideration Perry's (1973) view of the power associated with this number. Perry notes the repeated use of this digit in classical literature (e.g. "the Furies, the Gorgons, the Graces"; p.145), the bible (e.g. the three Wise Men bringing their triad of gifts, Jesus avows "I am the way, the truth, and the life"; p.146) and in more modern times (e.g. "The Three Bears, Three Blind Mice, The Three Little Pigs (one of whom even went "wee-wee-wee all the way home"; p.147) has resulted in the digit accumulating cultural significance. For Perry, this digit's repeated presence throughout the ages "cannot conceivably be simply coincidental or just merely accidental" (p.144) and its "persistent potency" has led to its association with "supernatural qualities" (p.144). The "power of three" phrase in extract 2 appeared to reinforce the social hierarchy extended in extract 1, by demarcating Ollie, Zoe, and Max as being special. Whether, actors knew of, or believed in, the "supernatural" qualities associated with this digit is of no interest to this paper. However, this phrase did appear to facilitate the shifting of the topic away from the construction of the changing business landscape and facilitated in the leveraging of these actors in relation to one another and to others.

#### **5.4. Little *'d'*iscourse and big *'D'*iscourse**

In extract 2, Max draws upon notions of "the business", "the city", "London" and "the 'Jewell' tradition of 'smile and have fun'" when widening out a social reality to attendees about how the world of business is changing. It would be interesting to explore whether these or similar notions are evoked in other meetings and settings within the organisation and, if they are, whether they too appear to facilitate the construction of social realities.



Such an exploration would draw parallels with research that looks into the role of discourse and Discourse in talk. Research into discourse explores whether the aggregation and accumulation of talk in everyday settings (e.g. informal conversations, interviews, meetings, briefings and presentations) constructs social realities (Phillips and Oswick, 2012) and whether these social realities become reified and taken for granted. When social realities become reified, Discourses are proposed to have been formed and these Discourses can ‘rule in’ or ‘rule out’ acceptable and intelligible ways for actors to talk about a topic or to construct knowledge about it (Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy, 2004). For example, Discourses of management (Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, 2009), leadership (Crevani, 2011; Crevani et al., 2010), age, gender, education, success, status (Blustein, Schultheiss and Flum, 2004; Burr, 1995) and the market (Clifton, 2014) have been theorised to define key realities of a situation (e.g. such as power relationships and the capacity to speak and to be heard) before an interaction has even commenced (Du Gay, 2000).

Access to more meetings and conversations in other organisational settings could facilitate whether notions of “the business”, “the city”, “London” and “the ‘Jewell’ tradition” and/or other notions had accumulated and aggregated over time in creating social realities and become reified as Discourses. Further exposure to and observations of the organisation may facilitate an exploration of both this question and also whether Discourses affect how direction is produced through the construction of issues and positionings in actors’ talk.

### ***5.5. Limitations/Future Directions***

As Shotter and Katz (1996) and Ramsey (2013) note, the findings from this paper are a gesture; a noticing and pointing toward possible inquiry rather than an attempt at empirical generalization (Alvesson, 1996). This paper sought to build on Drath et al’s (2008) and Crevani and colleague’s (Packendorff et al., 2014; Crevani (2011); Crevani et al., 2010) studies to “say something interesting” (Alvesson, 1996, p.478) about an aspect of leadership constructed in actors’ talk within and about the meeting; the producing of direction in processes of relating.

The use of a pilot focused ethnography meant a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the research setting was not possible. Indeed, with this research and other student research within the social sciences the practicalities of access and time have to be factored in when making methodological choices. As Edmondson and McManus (2007) note, “as a researcher strives to resolve the tension between the ideal version of his or her project and one that is feasible and viable, the design evolves” (p.1174) and a considered trade-off has to be

made to enable research to be operationalised. However, through observing a business meeting and interviewing some of the attendees about it, this paper did explore one ubiquitous genre within organisations, the business meeting, which has been considered to be “where organizations come together” (Boden, 1994, p.81).

Business meetings’ have been characterised as sharing similar tenets. For example, they are goal and task orientated (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997), information orientated (Boden, 1994), they involve decision-making either directly (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997) or ‘in spirit’ (Boden, 1994), and they have relatively clear beginnings and endings (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1996) or, in the case of more informal meetings, they have “noticeable and analysable openings and closings” (Boden, 1994, p.84). Exploring a genre which has been characterised as having a common purpose and structure facilitated the collection and interpretation of rich dialogue and multi-logue. Future research may, however, benefit from widening the focus of this paper from the work of Crevani and colleagues to explore the producing of direction in other genres within the workplace, such as coffee breaks, lunch breaks, appraisals, and job interviews.

As previously noted, the use of video recordings was explored but its use was not permitted. The most obvious quality of using this medium is its ability to reproduce the minutiae of temporal and sequential details of social interactions and to show actors’ appearance, locality, movements, gaze and interaction and the appearance of the local environment (Mumford, 2014). However, a less obvious and less utilised use of video recordings explored by Mumford is how this medium can be used within an iterative dialogic cycle. In Mumford’s study the video footage was viewed and interpreted, actors’ discursive accounts of the phenomenon in question (silence) were explored in interviews, and, following actors’ accounts, the videos were re-viewed with a different lens. As Mumford (2014) notes, “The phenomenon of silence therefore was situated not wholly within the video nor wholly within their (or my) account of the meeting, but emerged from a relationship between the forms of data” (p.12). If the use of video recording was permissible in this paper it may have been interesting to explore, like Mumford (2014) did, whether, following actors’ discursive accounts and the re-viewing of the meeting, new or alternative interpretations of producing direction were found to be emerging.

Returning to Merriam’s (1997) point about how a researcher adopting a relatively overt stance may affect participants’ contribution to the meeting, an interesting perspective put forward by Max during his interview

was that he too shared this concern; “[one thing] I was concerned about was the fact that they’re not used to having any visitors outside of the brand team”. However, Max went on to reflect “I think they carried on normally... you know, it wasn’t like ohh, theres somebody in the room that’s not normally here, so therefore I don’t want to say anything”. From Max’s reflection on the meeting it appears that although the presence of a ‘stranger’ had the potential to disrupt the normal working practices of the team, from his perspective it didn’t and thus the observation of conversations within the meeting could be considered, so far as possible, to be instances of “naturally occurring talk” (Emerson et al., 1995, p.140).

### ***5.6. Reflexivity***

Researching leadership as a relational phenomenon which travels in conversation was, on reflection, a difficult undertaking. Firstly, there is a relatively small literature on this phenomenon in the field to draw from. In retrospect the small number of studies that there are may have, unduly, influenced my inference about what leadership ‘looked’ like in this study. Crevani et al’s (2010) and Crevani’s (2011) inferences, that the production of direction is synonymous with leadership, may have unduly influenced the similar inference I made. On reflection, by trying to be ‘open’ to the potential for the conversation to produce moments of leadership I may have, unwittingly, become blinkered to the possibility that no such moments may be present. Secondly, and relatedly, perhaps because the research project title was advertised as ‘A Discursive Investigation of Leading in Organisational Conversations’, and because the studentship led onto a further programme of post-graduate study, I became too preoccupied with ‘finding’ leadership and once ‘found’ in defending its uncovering. These are valuable lessons learnt for me to learn as I continue onto doctoral study. The study would have been no weaker for drawing an inference that organising was present in conversations without making an additional leadership inference. Thirdly, the studies which have researched leadership as a relational phenomenon that travels in conversation have largely been ethnographic in nature with researchers’ spending years in the field constructing data. It should be borne in mind that the extracts presented in this study were taken, albeit because of the time and resource constraints which come from a masters study, from one meeting and therefore there is a danger that too much weight was put onto the ‘shoulders’ of this data.

In relation to my handling and interpretation of extant literature, a further reflection is that maybe this study was overly ambitious when attempting to explore the use of management jargon in one meeting. Watson’s (2004) reflections on managerial pseudo-jargon were, for example, drawn from a series of ethnographies compiled over many years into a “metaethnography of managerial work”. The present study, in comparison was an observation of one meeting. Such limited access makes it difficult, therefore, to make an informed

judgment about what management jargon 'is' because there is little other talk, either in this setting or in other settings, to compare it to. One learning point to be taken from this is that regardless of the scope of the research project one should be realistic, particularly so in a master's study, about what is feasible to explore in the time permitted.

Problematisation of the extant literature led to a discovery that the majority of relational leadership studies proceeded with a knowledge of their participants occupational statuses. Following Ramsey (2013), this study speculated to what extent this knowledge may, unduly, influence authors' inferences about the communicative performance of leadership. This was, however, an easier feat to accomplish in theory than it was in practice. The logistics of this study, and one would presume most studies, meant I was privy to the positions of seniority (most) attendees held in the organisation. For example, when arranging my arrival at the company offices some of the attendees included their job title in their email signature. In addition, when being introduced to attendees before the meeting commenced introductions often included attendees' job titles. Such knowledge, in theory, was not meant to have influenced the inferences drawn during the research. In retrospect, however, it will undoubtedly have. A lesson to be learnt in this case, again as I go on to doctoral study, is that research does not happen in a vacuum and one should try to be aware of the contingencies involved in carrying it out and factor these in when making sense of contributions to extant knowledge.

A further learning point for the future, is for me to draw more from my personal reflections and field notes on the day and to be less reliant on the meeting recording and the transcript. There was perhaps a potential for me to see the meeting transcript and recording to be more 'valid', then my reflections and notes, because they could be verified. A pertinent example where notes and reflections could have been used was in the case of attendees positioning themselves and others through verbal and non-verbal communication. Prior to the meeting, for example, when attendees were waiting for the meeting room to be prepared some of the attendees were playing what appeared to be a game whereby they took it in turns to guess the manufacturer of each other's tie and then to guess its price. This form of communication, which was not audio recorded, could potentially also have been inferred as an example whereby attendees were positioning one another in relation to their appearance and their status.

Field notes could also have been read for meaning when making inferences about attendees positioning of one another through non-verbal communication. When drawing the seating plan it was evident, for example, that the "power three", who appeared to position themselves as part of the central management team, were all seated at the head of the table. In conjunction with verbal communication this form of communication could,

therefore, have been read for meaning by creating a power distance in the meeting. In addition, the male central management team were wearing business suits which had very similar characteristics. Their trouser hems were, for example, shortened to reveal bright colour socks which matched, in terms of colourfulness, their ties. In addition they were both wearing identical black buckle-over shoes. By contrast, the store managers were wearing more conservative business suits. Again, such an observation may have been a useful addition when making inferences about how attendees appeared to position themselves and one another. This overreliance on using transcripts and recordings over reflections and field-notes, and the overreliance on verbal over non-verbal communication are two considerations I will take forward into future research.

A more practical consideration in relation to the field notes was my seating positioning, at one end of the table, in the meeting. Sitting opposite the central management team meant that, because they talked the most in the meeting, for the majority of the meeting the store managers talk and gaze were directed towards these managers and away from me. This could be considered advantageous in respect that I was, more often than not, not in the eye-line of the majority of meeting attendees. The flipside of this meant that I could see more of the central management team's non-verbal communication than the other attendees. This may have resulted in me overly focusing on what the attendees directly in front of me were saying, to the detriment of attendees who were seated to the side of me. A researcher when observing in the field can never adopt a 'perfect' position, however their position should be acknowledged when inferences are being made and are being presented. This, again, is a valuable lesson to take forward when I undertake field work involving observation in the future.

The extent to which the use of interviews enriched the understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon, which travels in conversations, is open to debate. Interviews were intended to contextualise attendees' naturally occurring talk in the meeting but, ultimately, my inferences about leadership were drawn from naturally occurring talk within the meeting. On the one hand the interviews did provide some context and clues to the use of language in the meeting with, for example, the use of the word 'guest' meaning customer. In other instances the interviews provided situated accounts to contextualise the inferences being drawn, as was the case, for example, where one attendee was positioned in and outside of the meeting as being the organisation's "star performer". However, a point for me to consider when conducting similar studies in the future is to what extent was this information beneficial to answering the research questions? It may have been more advantageous, for example, to have spent the time conducting, transcribing, and analysing the interviews to use the field notes and personal reflections in more depth in conjunction with the meeting transcript and audio recording.

In short, this piece of research was seen as a valuable learning experience for me. It was my first attempt at a communicative and sociological type of research. Having previously studied psychology, and having carried out dissertations in this field, it was a noticeable shift and effort to resist the urge to try and ascertain what someone 'meant' and the motivations behind people's talk. In addition having studied Business Psychology and learning about leadership from, for example: traits, styles, and contingency approaches it was somewhat of a shift to study leadership as a communicative and relational phenomenon.

To summarise, if I were to do this research again I would bear the following considerations in mind: to be mindful of the potential for leadership to not be present in conversations; to not be overly ambitious by trying to explore numerous concepts (e.g. management speak, act+supplement, perlocutionary and illocutionary acts, etc.); to be more realistic about the logistics of undertaking research and to what extent this impacts on the potential for contributions to extant knowledge; to be less reliant on transcripts and recordings and to use my field-notes and personal reflections more; to consider that 'more' data is not always necessarily advantageous; and, to acknowledge and reflect upon my personal background more, and how this may influence my approach when carrying out such research. Although my doctoral study is not focused on leadership it does have a strong communicative element to it and so the learnings from doing this research, and from the feedback received, will be very valuable in the future.

### ***5.7. Conclusion***

By focusing on actors' conversations this paper found that events, problems and opportunities were constructed into issues which broadened out or narrowed down social realities for actors. The positioning of actors, in terms of whether they were constructed as making or being expected to make a contribution to these social realities, was also evident through the ongoing extension and concertina of hierarchy.

Act+ supplement (Gergen, 1994), language games (Pondy, 1978) and subject position (Davies and Harré, 1990) theories facilitated an exploration of how (through the use of linguistic devices and phrases) actors' leveraged social realities and their own and others' positions in their talk. In addition, this paper heeded Alvesson's (1996) and Ramsey's (2013) advice by studying leadership as a social process and departed from the majority of studies conducted from within relational perspectives of leadership by not having an a priori view of who leaders 'are' before and throughout the research. The extracts presented in this study and their analysis from a process of becoming ontology (Wood, 2005) and from a social-constructionist epistemology

may serve as a pointer for others who are interested in exploring further the relational (re)producing of direction within conversations as a micro-process of leadership.

However, while being open to the possibility of leadership being present within conversations researchers should not become too preoccupied with its uncovering. As noted in the reflexivity section, the inference that conversations can 'lead' is, especially in light of the scarce literature in this area, a difficult one to make and to justify. There are also several practical considerations to be factored in when exploring relational leadership. The chief considerations for researchers are: to be pragmatic about the extent to which actors' statuses may affect their inferences; to consider the advantages of combining 'naturally occurring' data with more 'performative' interview data during analysis; and, to draw upon field-notes and personal reflections made in the field more. This last point is particularly pertinent when exploring the effect non-verbal communication, in addition to verbal communication, has on how conversations travel and organise.

## **6. Ethics**

One ethical issue faced in this paper, and in most other research within the social sciences, concerns providing participants with sufficient information about the research so as to not deceive them and gain their informed consent, but not to divulge information which might affect their behaviour in ways that would invalidate any conclusions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Indeed, as Atkinson (2009) notes, if the outcomes of an ethnography were entirely predictable there would be virtually no point in conducting the research at all. With this consideration in mind the information sheet (see Appendix 1) and the researcher informed participants that the research was an exploration of team members' communication within meetings; thereby not misleading participants but not, so far as possible, influencing their interactions either.

Participants were informed from the outset that their contributions to the research would remain anonymous and confidential throughout. Audio recordings were stored on an encrypted computer and field notes were locked in a secure cupboard at the university, with only the researcher and his two supervisors having access to the recordings and field notes. Pseudonyms were used throughout data analysis and reporting to conceal the identity of the organisation, meeting attendees, colleagues, and the organisation's (and competitor's) products and services. Distinctive features (e.g. participants' appearance, accent, dialect etc.) were also omitted from analysis to ensure anonymity.

Participants' right to withdraw is a basic right within social research and a complex issue within ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Borgatti and Molina's (2003) ethical guidelines were drawn on in this regard. These state that participants may withdraw their involvement and data (i.e. their contribution to conversations) from the research. However, if during the course of the meeting or in the follow-up interviews other participants made reference to them then this reference (as with all references to individuals throughout this research) would be included and analysed anonymously.

Approval for this research was granted by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. Prior to the meeting all attendees signed a consent form (see Appendix 3) indicating they had read the information sheet (see Appendix 1) and that they were willing to participate in the research.



## References

- Adler PA and Adler P. (1994) Observational techniques. *Handbook of qualitative research* 1: 377-392.
- Alvesson M. (1996) Leadership studies: From procedure and abstraction to reflexivity and situation. *The Leadership Quarterly* 7: 455-485.
- Alvesson M and Sandberg J. (2011) Generating research questions through problematization. *Academy of Management Review* 36: 247-271.
- Alvesson M and Sveningsson S. (2003) The great disappearing act: difficulties in doing "leadership". *The Leadership Quarterly* 14: 359-381.
- Ashcraft KL, Kuhn TR and Cooren F. (2009) Constitutional Amendments: "Materializing" Organizational Communication. *The Academy of Management Annals* 3: 1-64.
- Astley WG and Zammuto RF. (1992) Organization science, managers, and language games. *Organization Science* 3: 443-460.
- Atkinson P. (2009) Ethics and ethnography. *Twenty-First Century Society* 4: 17-30.
- Austin JL. (1975) *How to do things with words*: Oxford university press.
- Bargiela F and Harris SJ. (1997) *Managing language: The discourse of corporate meetings*: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Bargiela-Chiappini F and Harris SJ. (1996) Interruptive strategies in British and Italian management meetings. *Text* 16: 269-297.
- Blustein DL, Palladino Schultheiss DE and Flum H. (2004) Toward a relational perspective of the psychology of careers and working: A social constructionist analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 64: 423-440.
- Boden D. (1994) *The business of talk: Organizations in action*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Borgatti SP and Molina JL. (2003) Ethical and strategic issues in organizational social network analysis. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 39: 337-349.
- Burr V. (1995) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. New York: Routledge.
- Carroll B and Simpson B. (2012) Capturing sociality in the movement between frames: An illustration from leadership development. *Human relations* 65: 1283-1309.
- Clifton J. (2014) Small stories, positioning, and the discursive construction of leader identity in business meetings. *Leadership* 10: 99-117.
- Cooren F, Kuhn T, Cornelissen JP and Clark T. (2011) Communication, organizing and organization: An overview and introduction to the special issue. *Organization Studies* 32: 1149-1170.
- Crevani L. (2011) *Clearing for action: Leadership as a relational phenomenon*. KTH Royal Institute of Technology. Stockholm.
- Crevani L, Lindgren M and Packendorff J. (2010) Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 26: 77-86.
- Czarniawska B. (2004) *Narratives in social science research*: Sage.
- Dachler HP and Hosking D-M. (1995) The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities. *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism*: 1-28.
- Davies B and Harré R. (1990) Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the theory of social behaviour* 20: 43-63.

- Denis J-L, Langley A and Sergi V. (2012) Leadership in the plural. *The Academy of Management Annals* 6: 211-283.
- Djordjilovic O. (2012) Displaying and developing team identity in workplace meetings—a multimodal perspective. *Discourse Studies* 14: 111-127.
- Drath WH, McCauley CD, Palus CJ, Van Velsor E, O'Connor PMG and McGuire JB. (2008) Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly* 19: 635-653.
- Drew P and Holt E. (1988) Complainable matters: The use of idiomatic expressions in making complaints. *Social Problems*: 398-417.
- Drew P and Holt E. (1998) Figures of speech: Figurative expressions and the management of topic transition in conversation. *Language in society* 27: 495-522.
- Du Gay P. (2000) Enterprise and its futures: a response to Fournier and Grey. *Organization* 7: 165-183.
- Edmondson AC and McManus SE. (2007) Methodological fit in management field research. *Academy of Management Review* 32: 1246-1264.
- Eisenberg EM. (1984) Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication monographs* 51: 227-242.
- Emerson RM, Fretz RI and Shaw LL. (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fairhurst GT and Uhl-Bien M. (2012) Organizational discourse analysis (ODA): Examining leadership as a relational process. *The Leadership Quarterly* 23: 1043-1062.
- Gans HJ. (1999) Participant observation in the era of “ethnography”. *Journal of contemporary ethnography* 28: 540-548.
- Geertz C. (1973) *Thick Description; Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. The interpretation of cultures: New York: Basic Books.
- Gergen KJ. (1994) *Realities and Relationships*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gold RL. (1958) Roles in sociological field observations. *Social forces*: 217-223.
- Goodwin C and Heritage J. (1990) Conversation analysis. *Annual review of anthropology*: 283-307.
- Hammersley M. (2005) Ethnography and discourse analysis: incompatible or complementary? *Polifonia* 10.
- Hammersley M and Atkinson P. (1983) *Ethnography: principles in practice*. . Tavistock, London.
- Hammersley M and Atkinson P. (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in practice*: Routledge.
- Holt E and Drew P. (2005) Figurative pivots: The use of figurative expressions in pivotal topic transitions. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 38: 35-61.
- Hosking DM. (2000) Ecology in mind, mindful practices. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 9: 147-158.
- Hosking DM. (2007) Not leaders, not followers: A post-modern discourse of leadership processes. *Followers-centred perspectives on leadership: a tribute to the memory of James R. Meindl, Information Age, Charlotte, NC*: 243-263.
- Hosking DM and Morley I. (1991) *A Social Psychology of Organising*, Chichester: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Kelly S. (2008) Leadership: A categorical mistake? *Human relations* 61: 763-782.
- Knoblauch H. (2005) Focused ethnography. *Qualitative Social Research* 6.

- Lehmann-Willenbrock N, Allen JA and Kauffeld S. (2013) A sequential analysis of procedural meeting communication: How teams facilitate their meetings. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 41: 365-388.
- Lindgren M and Packendorff J. (2011) Issues, responsibilities and identities: A distributed leadership perspective on biotechnology R&D management. *Creativity and Innovation Management* 20: 157-170.
- Lindgren M, Packendorff J and Tham H. (2011) Relational dysfunctionality: Leadership interactions in a Sarbanes-Oxley Act implementation project. *European Journal of International Management* 5: 13-29.
- Merriam SB. (1997) *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education: Revised and Expanded from Case Study Research in Education*: Wiley.
- Mumford C. (2014) Multiple lenses of self and other: a dialogical reading of video recordings, others' accounts & one's own fieldnotes to explore "what is going on here" in social interaction. *Qualitative Research in Management and Organization conference*. New Mexico.
- Nicholson H and Carroll B. (2013) Identity undoing and power relations in leadership development. *Human relations* 66: 1225-1248.
- Northouse PG. (2010) *Leadership, 5E : Theory And Practice*: Sage Publications India Pvt Limited.
- Packendorff J, Crevani L and Lindgren M. (2014) Project leadership in becoming: A process study of an organizational change project. *Project Management Journal* 45: 5-20.
- Perry CD. (1972) The Tyranny of Three. *Classical Journal*: 144-148.
- Phillips N, Lawrence TB and Hardy C. (2004) Discourse and institutions. *Academy of Management Review* 29: 635-652.
- Phillips N and Oswick C. (2012) Organizational discourse: Domains, debates, and directions. *The Academy of Management Annals* 6: 435-481.
- Pondy LR. (1978) Leadership is a language game. In: McCall MW and Lombardo MM (eds) *Leadership: where else can we go?* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 87-99.
- Ramsey C. (1998) Managing within conversation: influencing for change. *Career Development International* 3: 293-299.
- Ramsey C. (2013) Conversational travel and the performance of leadership. *British Academy of Management- Managing to make a difference*. Liverpool.
- Rescher N. (2000) *Process philosophy: A survey of basic issues*: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Rogelberg SG, Allen JA, Shanock L, et al. (2010) Employee satisfaction with meetings: A contemporary facet of job satisfaction. *Human Resource Management* 49: 149-172.
- Sandberg J and Alvesson M. (2011) Ways of constructing research questions: gap-spotting or problematization? *Organization* 18: 23-44.
- Schwartzman HB. (1989) *The meeting*: Springer.
- Searle JR. (1969) *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*: Cambridge university press.
- Shotter J and Katz AM. (1996) Articulating a practice from within the practice itself: establishing formative dialogues by the use of a 'social poetics'. *Concepts and Transformation* 1: 213-237.
- Silverman D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*: SAGE Publications.
- Taylor JR and Van Every EJ. (2011) *The situated organization: Case studies in the pragmatics of communication research*: Routledge.
- Thompson M. (2011) Ontological shift or ontological drift? Reality claims, epistemological frameworks, and theory generation in organization studies. *Academy of Management Review* 36: 754-773.

- Tracy K. (2007) The discourse of crisis in public meetings: Case study of a school district's multimillion dollar error. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 35: 418-441.
- Uhl-Bien M. (2006) Relational leadership theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing. *The Leadership Quarterly* 17: 654-676.
- Watson TJ. (2004) Managers, managism, and the tower of babble: making sense of managerial pseudojargon. *International journal of the sociology of language*: 67-82.
- Watson TJ. (2011) Ethnography, reality, and truth: the vital need for studies of 'how things work' in organizations and management. *Journal of Management Studies* 48: 202-217.
- Wittgenstein L. (1953) *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wood M. (2005) The Fallacy of Misplaced Leadership\*. *Journal of Management Studies* 42: 1101-1121.
- Ybema S, Yanow D, Wels H, et al. (2009) *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexity of everyday life*: Sage.
- Yukl GA. (2010) *Leadership in Organizations*: Pearson.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1



Business School

#### **Exploring team members' communication in meetings**

##### What is this research about?

I am interested in exploring team members' interactions with one another during workplace meetings.

##### Why is this important?

Recent research has shown employees, on average, attend three meetings a week and that attendee's rate the quality of these meetings as poor in nearly 42% of cases. On the other hand, research has shown that attendee's satisfaction with meetings plays a contributory role in their job satisfaction and their well-being. However, despite the average worker spending six hours per week in meetings relatively little is known about how teams structure their meetings, and attendees' perceptions of the effectiveness of meetings.

My research is therefore interested in exploring the perceptions of workers, like you, who regularly attend team meetings as part of their job, on these matters. This research is not looking for a 'right or wrong' kind of communication within meetings and will not make any judgemental evaluations about workers perceptions.

##### What will I be expected to do during this research?

To be able to explore these matters I would like to sit in on one or two routine team meetings to see and record (either by video, audio, or the taking of notes) team members' interactions. I will not be asking questions within the meeting or be making any other contribution to it. Therefore my presence will not disrupt the everyday working practices of you or the team.

Roughly one week after the meeting, I would then like to have a one-on-one discussion with the team members' who were in the meeting. This conversation will be entirely confidential and no names of colleagues or fellow team members will be discussed. Within the discussion team members' will be asked their views on how the meeting went, what was going on around the time of the meeting, and what happened after it finished. These conversations will take no longer than 30 minutes and will happen privately at a place and time convenient for the team member.

##### Who will benefit from this research?

After the meeting and discussions have finished I would like to write up my own reflections and the views of the team as a whole. Everyone who took part in the meeting and discussions will be given

the opportunity to see these reflections, and depending on the team's preference, they will be fed back either one-on-one or to the team. At no point during the write up or during either one-on-one or group feedback will the views of specific individuals be discussed. Team members' may wish to draw on this feedback and consider, depending on different circumstances, whether the content and structure of future meetings could be altered. This write up will count towards the research requirement of my postgraduate degree and may possibly, in the future, be written up in publications that are read by other academics. This research is therefore purely for academic purposes and neither myself or others will benefit financially from it.

### Confidentiality

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. From the start of this research to the final write up, the identity of the organisation and the identities of everyone taking part, and their views, will be anonymous. In addition the identities of people not taking part in this research, who are mentioned by participants, will also be anonymous. Also, any interactions which may lead to people being identified (for example a distinctive dialect) will not be included in the write up of reflections.

My reflections and those of team members will be stored securely on a password protected computer at The Open University throughout the entire research process. These reflections will be confidential and can only be accessed by myself and by my supervisors, Dr Caroline Ramsey and Dr Alex Wright.

To make sure team members' views are accurately taken down I would like to make notes and use video and/or audio recordings throughout the research. Where team members would prefer recordings not to be used notes will be taken instead. This research is in full compliance with The Open University's ethical rules and the storage of your and others views will be in full accordance with UK Data Protection laws. If recordings are used you will be given the opportunity to view, and if you wish, amend the notes taken by myself on these. Everyone who agrees to take part in the research, can withdraw from it, and remove all of their contributions to it, at any point without giving a reason.

### When will the research take place?

I would like to sit in on one to two team meetings and discuss team members' views on these meetings during April- June 2014, with an exact date arranged at team members' convenience.

### Who is carrying out this research?

This research will be carried out by me, David Hollis, alongside Dr Caroline Ramsey ([caroline.ramsey@open.ac.uk](mailto:caroline.ramsey@open.ac.uk)) and Dr Alex Wright ([alex.wright@open.ac.uk](mailto:alex.wright@open.ac.uk)). I am currently studying for a postgraduate degree at the Open University Business School, and I have a long standing interest and experience in conducting research into, and giving lectures to students on, the psychological factors associated with the effectiveness and well-being of people at work.

I have experience in carrying out internationally respected research which has been published in journals reviewed by experienced academics. I have also presented this research at academic

conferences in America and in Europe, and I am a member of several Occupational Psychology and Occupational Health Psychology academies. I also hold undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Psychology, Work Psychology and Business, and vocational qualifications from the British Psychological Society. In addition, I have conducted research whilst working for the BBC and the Digital Marketing Group and I have conducted work placements for Impact International, an international people development and learning company.

To find out more about the research, or to obtain a full CV please contact me on the details below: [david.hollis@open.ac.uk](mailto:david.hollis@open.ac.uk); Flat 1, Cairn House, 115 Devonshire Road, Colliers Wood, London, SW19 2EQ; Tel: 07983982151

**Thank you for your time and consideration of this research**



### **Exploring team members' communication in meetings**

Thinking back to last week, could you tell me what was going on around the time of the meeting?

Turning to the meeting itself, what do you think were the most important issues raised or discussed?

And has anything important happened or occurred as a result of the meeting?

Would you say that meeting similar to other meetings the team has?

And would you say your involvement was similar to your usual involvement in the meetings the team has?

And finally are there any other issues or reflections that you have from last week that we haven't touched upon?





Business School

## Exploring team members' communication in meetings

### Consent form

I confirm that I have read and understood the attached information sheet about this research. I agree that the information I provide can be used, anonymously, to fulfil the requirement of the researchers MRes degree in Business and Management, and possibly be used in future academic publications.

I understand that if I have any questions or concerns about this research, I can contact the researcher or their supervisors using the contact details provided in the information sheet. I also understand that I can withdraw from this research and remove my contributions to it at any time, without giving a reason.

**Name**

---

**Email**

---

**Signature**

---

**Date**

---